



5.Universal Franchise and India's Electoral System

8th class social science Exploring Society: India and Beyond

By:K Sandeep Swamy(M.Sc,B.Ed)

For **Online Classes (IITJEE & NEET foundation and academics)**
contact : 9491878325

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"[India] adopted the principle of adult franchise with an abundant faith in the common man and the ultimate success of democratic rule...never before in the history of the world has such an experiment been so boldly undertaken."

- Alladi Krishnaswami Ayyar, November 1949, Constituent Assembly Debates

The World's Largest Democracy in Action

India's electoral system represents the world's largest democratic exercise, with approximately 980 million eligible voters in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. This chapter explores the foundations, mechanisms, and significance of India's electoral system.





Chapter Overview

1

What is universal adult franchise?

Understanding the cornerstone of Indian democracy that grants every adult citizen the right to vote.

2

What is an electoral system?

Exploring the framework that enables citizens to elect their representatives.

3

How does India's electoral system work?

Examining the mechanisms, institutions, and processes that make India's democracy function.

Understanding Universal Adult Franchise

Franchise: A right granted by the constitution or government. Another term used is 'suffrage', a synonym of franchise.

The Constitution makers decided that universal adult franchise would be a feature of Indian democracy right from the outset. This means that every adult citizen gets one vote, and all votes have equal value.

Every Indian citizen aged 18 and above has the right to vote – irrespective of caste, creed, race, religion, gender, education, income, etc. The word 'universal' connotes this inclusivity.



Historical Significance

Progressive Vision

India was among the early nations to grant women the right to vote, ahead of many others around the world. For example, women in Switzerland only received voting rights in 1971.

Bold Decision

In 1947, India's literacy rate was about 14%, yet the Constitution makers decided on universal franchise from Independence itself, showing faith in all citizens.

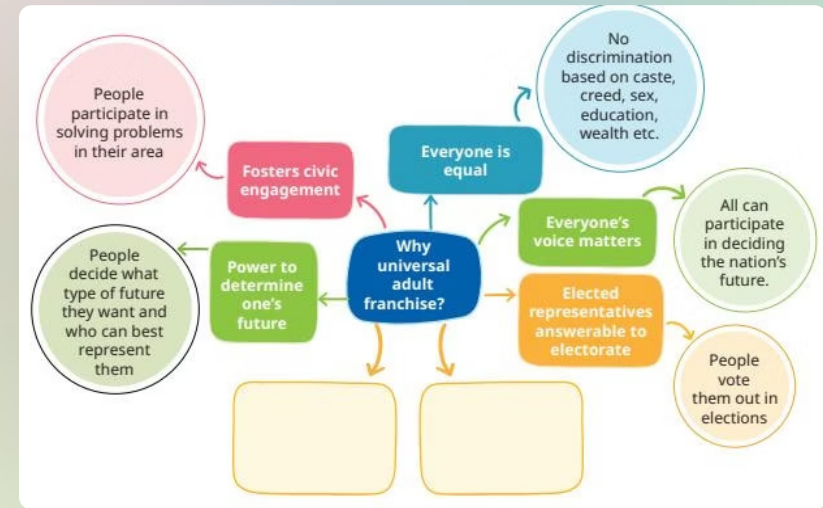
Expanding Access

India changed the minimum voting age from 21 to 18 in 1988, further broadening democratic participation.

Importance of Universal Franchise

Universal franchise is a cornerstone of Indian democracy. Elections to the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, and all local elections in villages and cities are based on this principle (Article 326 of the Constitution).

To exercise this right, citizens must be registered as voters in their constituency. However, one may be barred from voting if found guilty of committing certain serious crimes.



Scale of Indian Democracy

980M

Eligible Voters

For the 2024 Lok Sabha
elections

543

Constituencies

In the Lok Sabha

3.1M

**Elected
Representatives**

In local government bodies
(1.3M women)

250K+

Local Bodies

Democratically elected
across India

India needs an elaborate and well-organised system to manage this massive exercise and ensure that elections take place fairly and freely.

Bridging Barriers, Enabling Participation

Democracy thrives when every eligible citizen can freely and fairly participate in the electoral process. The Election Commission of India has taken several innovative accessibility measures to remove barriers to exercising franchise.

- Electoral officials travel to remote locations
- Home voting for elderly and people with disabilities
- Postal voting for specific categories
- Braille-enabled voter cards
- App-based requests for assistance





Ensuring Inclusive Participation

India's electoral system endeavors to enable every citizen to exercise their franchise, including those in the most remote locations. This commitment to inclusivity is essential for a truly representative democracy.

- About 34% of eligible voters did not exercise their right to vote in the 2024 elections. Understanding and addressing the challenges people face in exercising their rights remains an important area of focus.

Fig. 5.6. India's electoral system endeavours to enable every citizen to exercise their franchise. This includes measures such as organising a polling station for a single woman voter, postal voting and providing wheelchair assistance.

Election for Class Representative

The case study of Grade 8 at Suryodaya School demonstrates key electoral principles in action:

- Three candidates (Ahmed, Gurmat, and Ravi) with different platforms
- Fair campaigning opportunities for all candidates
- Secret ballot voting to ensure privacy and fairness
- Transparent counting process with witnesses
- Inclusive measures (braille ballot for Neha)



Gurmat won with 12 votes, Ahmed received 8, and Ravi 10, with one invalid ballot. This demonstrates the "First-Past-the-Post" system used in Indian elections.



The Election Commission of India

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is an independent constitutional body established in 1950. It is responsible for conducting free and fair elections to:

- The Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament)
- The Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament)
- State Legislative Assemblies
- Offices of the President and Vice President

The first general elections in independent India were held in 1951-1952.

Structure and Functions of the ECI



Scheduling Elections

Determining election dates and ensuring timely conduct of polls



Electoral Rolls

Preparing and maintaining voter lists to ensure all eligible citizens can vote



Candidate Oversight

Scrutinizing nomination papers and monitoring candidate conduct



Code Enforcement

Implementing the Model Code of Conduct to ensure fair elections



Voter Education

Raising awareness about the electoral process and voting rights



Result Declaration

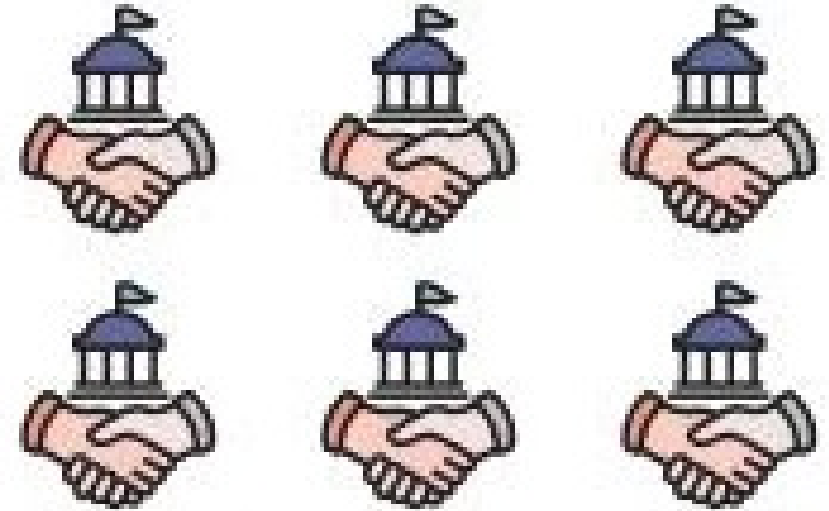
Counting votes and announcing election results



The Scale of Indian Elections

Managing elections in India is a mammoth task. The ECI has been upgrading its capacities to keep pace with the needs of modern India in conducting free and fair elections.

- ① 84 of the Lok Sabha constituencies are reserved for persons from the scheduled castes, while 47 are reserved for scheduled tribes. The remaining 412 are general constituencies.



543
parliamentary
constituencies

The Voting Process



First Polling Officer

Checks name on voter list and verifies ID proof

Second Polling Officer

Inks finger, gives voting chit, and takes voter's signature

Third Polling Officer

Takes chit, checks inked finger, and directs voter to EVM

Voting

Voter presses button on EVM to cast vote; VVPAT provides paper verification

Technology in Elections

Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)

India's EVMs have revolutionized the voting process, making it faster and more reliable. These machines are not connected to any network, ensuring they cannot be hacked remotely.

Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT)

VVPAT produces a physical paper record, allowing voters to verify that their electronic votes were cast correctly. This provides a backup for verification and recounting purposes.



India's electronic voting technology has been so successful that countries like Namibia and Bhutan have adopted it with support from the ECI.



Model Code of Conduct

Government Restrictions

The party in government must not use state resources for election purposes. No new schemes or projects can be announced that may influence voters.

Candidate Behavior

All candidates must exercise discretion and restraint to ensure peaceful elections. Abusive language against opponents is prohibited.

No Voter Inducement

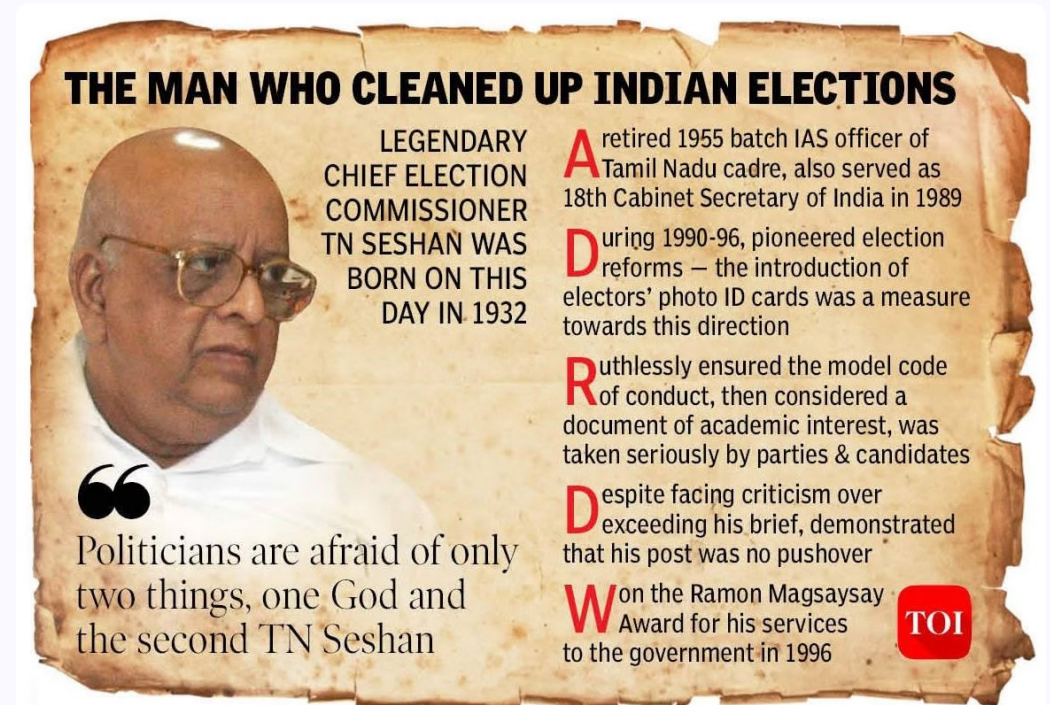
Influencing voters through gifts in return for votes is punishable. Cash and other inducements are strictly monitored.

T.N. Seshan: The Election Reformer

T.N. Seshan became the Chief Election Commissioner in 1990 and brought in significant reforms to ensure free and fair elections:

- Enforced precise rules for campaigning
- Introduced voter IDs to eliminate proxy voting
- Implemented strict vigilance on candidate spending
- Protected voters' rights through fearless enforcement

Seshan is remembered as the officer who made Indian elections fairer, more transparent, and fearless.



THE MAN WHO CLEANED UP INDIAN ELECTIONS

LEGENDARY
CHIEF ELECTION
COMMISSIONER
TN SESHAN WAS
BORN ON THIS
DAY IN 1932

“
Politicians are afraid of only
two things, one God and
the second TN Seshan

A retired 1955 batch IAS officer of Tamil Nadu cadre, also served as 18th Cabinet Secretary of India in 1989

D uring 1990-96, pioneered election reforms — the introduction of electors' photo ID cards was a measure towards this direction

R uthlessly ensured the model code of conduct, then considered a document of academic interest, was taken seriously by parties & candidates

D espite facing criticism over exceeding his brief, demonstrated that his post was no pushover

W on the Ramon Magsaysay Award for his services to the government in 1996

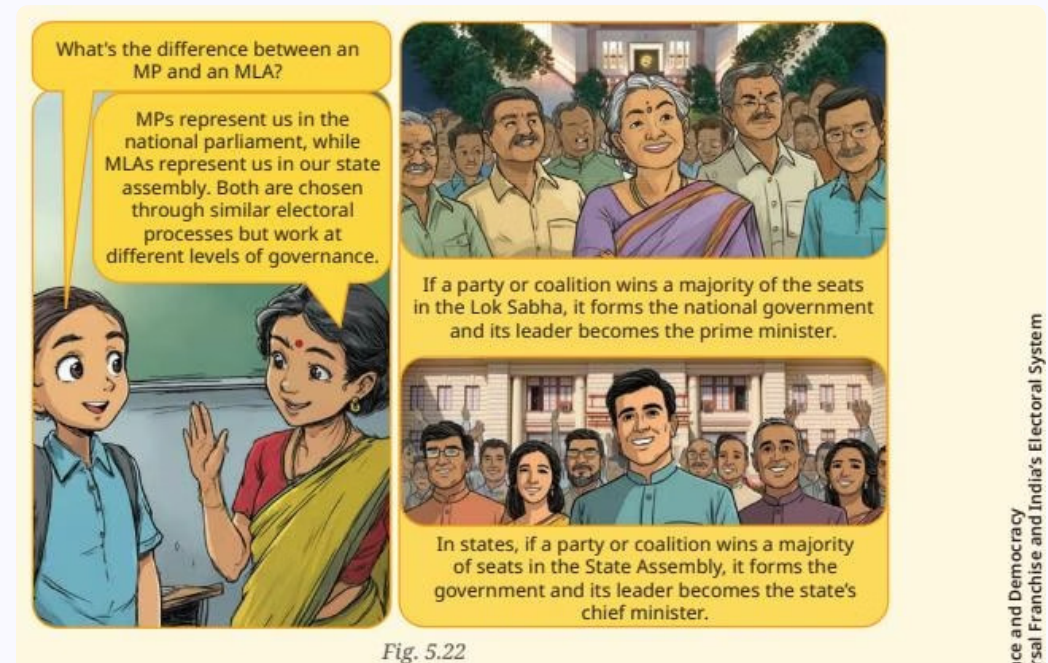
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Elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies

India follows a parliamentary system of government where citizens participate in various levels of elections:

- Lok Sabha (national level)
- State legislative assemblies (state level)
- Local bodies (city and village level)

The country is divided into 543 constituencies for the Lok Sabha elections. Elected candidates to the Lok Sabha are known as Members of Parliament (MPs), while those elected to state assemblies are called Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs).



As we saw in Fig. 5.11, the State Election Commission is a part of the election apparatus. It plays an important role not only in general and state elections but also in conducting elections to

India uses the 'First-Past-the-Post' electoral system, wherein the candidate receiving the most votes in a constituency wins, even without securing 50% of the total votes.

Government Formation



Election Results

After voting is completed, votes are counted and results are declared for all constituencies



Majority Formation

The political party or coalition winning a majority of the seats forms the government



Leadership Selection

The leader of the majority typically becomes the Prime Minister (national) or Chief Minister (state)

A coalition is a group of two or more parties working together to achieve the required majority when no single party wins enough seats to form a government independently.

Election to the Rajya Sabha

Indirect Election

Of the 245 members, 233 are elected by state legislative assembly members (MLAs), while 12 are nominated by the President of India.

State Representation

Each state is allotted a different number of seats based on population. More populous states have more seats.

Permanent House

The Rajya Sabha is never dissolved. Members serve six-year terms, with one-third retiring every two years.



Single Transferable Vote System

The Rajya Sabha uses a 'single transferable vote system' for elections. This special voting method ensures that smaller states also get fair representation.

1

Preference Ranking

Voters (MLAs) rank candidates in order of preference (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.)

2

Quota Calculation

A quota is calculated based on the number of valid votes and available seats

3

Vote Transfer

If a candidate exceeds the quota, surplus votes are transferred according to next preferences

4

Elimination Process

If no candidate reaches the quota, the lowest-ranked candidate is eliminated and their votes redistributed

Election of the President of India

The President of India is not directly elected by the common people. Instead, an electoral college is formed to carry out the election. This Electoral College consists of:

- Members of Parliament (MPs) from both houses
- Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) from states and the union territories of Delhi and Puducherry

The single transferable vote system is used in this election. Since the president represents the whole country, this method ensures the support of both central and state governments.



The more populous states have a greater say in the presidential election, reflecting India's federal structure.



Election of the Vice President

Electoral College

The Vice President is elected by an electoral college consisting of elected and nominated members of both Houses of Parliament.

Voting Method

The system of single transferable vote is used, similar to the presidential election.

Dual Role

The Vice President serves as the chairperson of the Rajya Sabha and steps in when the President is unable to discharge their functions.

Challenges and The Road Ahead

Current Challenges

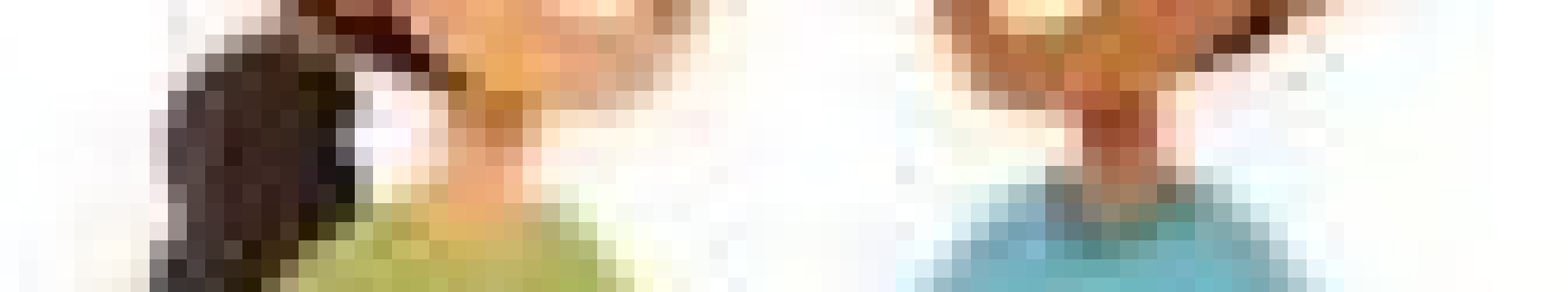
- Growing influence of money in elections
- Significant proportion of candidates with criminal records
- Voter apathy, particularly in urban areas
- Declining voter turnout in some regions

The Way Forward

- Empowering voters with information
- Media, education, and awareness campaigns
- Engaging youth in the democratic process
- Strengthening electoral reforms

An aware and vigilant voter is the strongest safeguard of a democratic system. It starts with asking the right questions – and ends with casting a responsible vote.





Key Takeaways



Universal Adult Franchise

The cornerstone of Indian democracy, granting every adult citizen the right to vote regardless of background.



Institutional Framework

The Election Commission of India conducts free and fair elections at all levels, from local bodies to the President.



Citizen Responsibility

The right to vote comes with the responsibility to participate thoughtfully in the democratic process.



Ongoing Evolution

Indian democracy faces challenges that call for voters' vigilance, awareness, and active participation.